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## **Speaker - Talking and listening to children - Themes from Phase One**

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# Talking and listening to children: themes from Phase One

# Selection of teams

- Three researchers located in eight social work teams across the UK (two in each nation) for a period of approximately six to eight weeks each
- Sampling of teams was purposeful and pragmatic (Suri, 2011)
- The local authorities and/or Trusts were those with which the research team already had connections due to previous research or teaching relationships.

# The children and families

- 82 social worker encounters observed in interactions with 126 children and young people ranging in age from babies who were a few months old to 17 year-old young people
- In some cases, other children were present (0-5 other children), and in a small number of situations, older siblings who were young adults were also present
- Most White/British

# The visits

- Over half of the social worker encounters took place at home (57%) and around a quarter (24%) took place in school
- The remainder took place in public places (especially supermarket cafes) or specialist settings including social services buildings, a pre-booked library room, a hospital ward, a police child protection unit and secure accommodation
- When home was the venue for the meeting, children and young people were sometimes seen alone, either in their own bedrooms or because parents had left the living room to allow the child and social workers to speak, however, more often, parents or carers were present when a child or young person was interviewed at home

# *What are social workers observed to do when they communicate and engage with children and young people?*

- *Making connections*
- How ....

'Not so much that social workers made connections with children (which they did) but rather *how* they went about doing this. Findings revealed that some social workers employed a number of highly developed verbal and non-verbal skills to make connections with children. These included reflecting together on a shared memory of a previous visit, talking of interests held in common (for example dogs), use of compliments and the intricate weaving of 'safe' topics of discussion with the more challenging aspects.'

- The use of the personal self
- Importance of the social worker paying careful attention to the particularities and the personalities of the children involved.
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## *What are social workers observed to do when they communicate and engage with children and young people?*

- *Moving with the child*
- The very personal, physical and intimate nature of the encounter between the children of all ages/abilities and the social worker
- Ferguson's earlier research (2014) demonstrated that social workers are mobile individuals.
- Findings from our study support the idea that social workers are mobile, active and interactive

# *What are social workers observed to do when they communicate and engage with children and young people?*

- *Making meaning with children through a range of methods*
- Social workers engage with children using a number of methods and skills in the course of visits. These include (but are not limited to) drawing and colouring, Lego and arts and crafts based methods, as well as more specialist tools.



# How do practitioners experience and understand their communication with a child?

- Findings reveal some interesting contradictions in the difference between what social workers *understand* and what they *experience* in their communicative encounters
- Understand its centrality, its purpose.

# How do practitioners experience and understand their communication with a child?

Experienced it as challenging due to:

- structural factors (work overload, the process driven nature of the work);
- practice-related factors (conflicting professional expectations, unrealistic expectations, getting over families and children's apprehensions associated with previous encounters with the social worker) and;
- personal factors (their own preferences and levels of confidence and the personal emotional impact of the encounters).

# How do practitioners experience and understand their communication with a child?

- A relatively unexplored area in terms of social worker experience of communicative encounters is their own preferences in terms of the age group of children and young people with whom they prefer to work. This clearly has an impact as indicated in the example below:

'I think I've always preferred to work with teenagers because that's how I work and they're more likely to tell me what's happened and we see what we can do about it. But so especially primary school aged children they make me a little bit more like ahhh! [...]'

# How do children experience and understand their relationships with social workers?

- We did not interview children and young people in phase one of this study
- Some children and young people appeared to experience their social worker negatively as a stranger, a threat, an intruder, the enemy.
- Others experienced them more positively as the visitor, a friend and/or a source of support.

# What helps?

- *The reflective practitioner*
- This suggests the potential benefits of co-working or of research that is more explicitly 'action research' – trying out new approaches, reflecting on and reviewing them, revising them and then implementing a revised plan which is further reflected upon.

# What helps?

- *Use of self*
- It is acknowledged that relational social work is based on the notion of use of self and yet, fully realised in practice, this would involve social workers being able to be open and honest about their personal preferences, their likes/dislikes, their strengths and weaknesses, their intimate and distant relationships with children and families.

# What helps?

- *Importance of context*
- Relational social work and the communicative encounters that occur therein are influenced and shaped by space, time and context and these, in turn, are also themselves shaped by communicative encounters.

# Summary

- How social workers understand and experience their communicative encounters is shaped and informed by a number of discourses that operate at the organisational, practice and personal levels
- These discourses are not static but context specific and shaped further by temporal and spatial factors
- This suggests that focusing on the individual understanding and experience of social workers is as important as the focus on their shared experiences and understandings.



# So what... it's complex, dynamic and contingent

- Child
- Case
- Context